

COOPER TALKS DEFICIT CRISIS AND EARMARK REFORM

Says earmark reform alone can't fix the deficit

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Dark days for a deficit fighterBy Joshua GreenNovember 18, 2010

In the two weeks since the election, the deficit has taken center stage in Washington, propelled by a high-profile report on how to cut it from the chairmen of the president's deficit commission, and by a push to ban congressional earmarks from conservative activists. This is welcome news for Democratic Representative Jim Cooper of Tennessee, a renowned budgetary Cassandra who is so alarmed by the deficit that the first thing visitors to his Capitol Hill office encounter is a billboard displaying the steadily mounting US debt. Yesterday, it stood at \$13,050,588,009,652, and because Cooper believes that most people cannot fathom a number so large, it also breaks down the debt into the cost per person: \$42,350.

Cooper supports nearly every effort to cut spending and rein in the deficit — for years, he himself has voluntarily foregone earmarks. But he doesn't expect the numbers to shrink anytime soon. His disappointment with the reaction to the two deficit initiatives puts Tea Party triumphalism about curbing Washington's profligacy in perspective. Cooper thinks that real change is still a long way off.

The grounds for this grim assessment was the swift chorus of dismissal from almost every politician and interest group of the plan advanced last week by Erskine Bowles and Alan Simpson, co-chairmen of the deficit commission, to cut \$3.8 trillion in spending and sharply reduce the federal deficit. The proposal targets sacrosanct entitlements like Medicare and Social Security, as well as military spending, and includes tax increases alongside spending cuts. As Simpson put it, "We have harpooned all of the whales in the ocean, and some of the minnows."

The commission was not expected to release a proposal until December, when, it was hoped, at least 14 of the 18 members would sign off on it, thereby guaranteeing a vote in Congress. The fact that the chairmen abruptly released their own proposal was a tacit acknowledgment that this part of the task was futile: no such support would have been forthcoming. And sure enough, the main point of consensus has been a storm of anger that the plan is too radical and cuts too deep. "Getting real about those numbers is a gigantic task that could lead to riots, which we've seen in Europe," Cooper said. "That moment of realization hasn't happened here yet."

Opponents of earmarking, the process by which lawmakers steer money to pet projects, have had a much better go of it. On Tuesday, Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, a champion earmarker, bowed to pressure from Tea Party activists and agreed to a voluntary ban. But at least in budgetary terms, this is much less of a victory than it may seem. Earmarks account for only about \$16 billion a year, or less than one half of 1 percent of the federal budget. Banning them would not lower spending or cut the deficit, since, contrary to popular perception, the money would not be returned to the Treasury but would simply revert to the Appropriations Committee to be spent elsewhere. To make a real dent in federal spending, the appropriations process itself would need reform, and that's not currently on the table.

Cooper is a patient man. Banning earmarks may not cut the deficit, but he believes that even symbolic victories have value. "Congress is just an organized appetite," he said, "and earmarks encourage us to think of taxpayer money as our own." Anything that changes this cast of mind will help the larger task.

The danger is that voters may mistakenly believe that eliminating earmarks will do something significant toward solving the fiscal crisis — or, worse, that it is actually sufficient. That self-deception would leave the country even less prepared to confront the painful reckoning Cooper sees just ahead. "Our problems are worsening at a rate of \$8 billion a day — so earmarks represent basically two days of our problem," he said. "It's almost impossible for people to comprehend. When I talk even to sophisticated audiences and try to clue them in, they react like kids being told a bedtime story. They want to know, 'Where's the happy ending?' So far, there is still none in sight."

The original article from The Boston Globe can be found [here](#).###